

Simple Cures for Your Family's Nature-Deficit Disorder

By Eat Right Montana

Montanans are lucky to live in the “last best place.” Most of us are just an hour or two from multiple outdoor recreation opportunities on lakes, rivers, and streams. We have easy access to dozens of local, state, and national parks.

In our natural wonderland, is it possible that young Montanans are suffering from the condition that author Richard Louv has named “nature-deficit disorder?” Sadly, the answer is yes. Like their counterparts across the US, our children are spending more time plugged into some type of indoor technology and less time in natural outdoor activities.

“Experts in child health, behavior, and education are just beginning to document how important unstructured outdoor time is for young bodies and minds,” said Jessica Grennan, State Health Alliances Director for the American Heart Association in Montana. “A 2005 study by Kaiser Family Foundation found that Generation M (for media) spends over 44 hours per week in front of screens – and little or no time exploring the natural world around them. Rapid increases in the number of overweight children is just one of the problems that develops from our sedentary lifestyles.”

As the video game generation has become ‘de-natured,’ some researchers have begun to look at what may be missing when green space is replaced with screen space. According to the National Wildlife Federation, studies indicate that kids who regularly spend unstructured time outside:

- Play more creatively and have more active imaginations.
- Have lower stress levels and may experience fewer symptoms of attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
- Become fitter and leaner while developing stronger immune systems.
- Have greater respect for themselves, for others, and for the environment.

While connecting with nature is no magic cure-all for what ails American children, spending quality outdoor time together can have some serious benefits for Montana families.

“Summertime is the ideal time to get your family into the Green Hour habit,” Grennan said.

“The term ‘green hour’ was coined by the National Wildlife Federation to help parents focus on 60 minutes of unstructured play and interaction with the natural world. Current guidelines from the American Academy of Pediatrics also reinforce the need for daily family-focused, active playtime.”

Think that your family is just too busy for green time? Think about your memories of outdoor fun – climbing trees with friends, hiking with dad, or fishing with mom – and reconnect with nature today:

- **Connect with nature in your neighborhood.** A backyard birdfeeder or a simple magnifying glass are inexpensive ways to help children observe the natural world within an arm's reach.
- **Connect with nature in Montana parks.** Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks wants to be your outdoor vacation destination. Search <http://fwp.mt.gov/parks/> for parks and fun events.
- **Connect with nature in Yellowstone National Park.** Online and in person, NPS has special programs and materials for kids. Visit www.nps.gov/yell/forkids/index.htm for more information.

Five Easy Ways to Help Children Enjoy Nature

Although 'Nature Deficit Disorder' is all too common among today's video game generation, the cure is quite simple. According to the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), all it takes is a Green Hour of outdoor time every day with your children: www.greenhour.org/

- **Connect with nature in your own backyard.** If you don't have a whole hour, you can start connecting kids with nature in just 15 or 20 minutes in your own backyard. Start with a simple activity like Nature's Rainbow: Sit or lie quietly in one place and let children name the colors they see in nature, like sky blue, brown tree bark, yellow dandelions, and green grass.
- **Connect with nature in your neighborhood.** Kids are naturally curious about the world around them. Their sense of wonder at small discoveries can help even the most stressed-out adult relax. At any time of year, amazing things are happening right outside your door: bugs are crawling, flowers are blooming, leaves are turning color, or squirrels are hiding food.
- **Connect with nature in your local parks.** You don't have to be an expert to help kids connect with the joys of the natural world. If you want to know the scientific names of the trees or birds you see, buy a simple guidebook or borrow one from the library. Many children will be just as happy to make up names for the 'wild' things you find walking through the park.
- **Connect with nature in your state parks.** Every state park system is a network of inexpensive outdoor adventures waiting for your family. Visit the website for parks in your state (or a neighboring one) and pick a park with an intriguing natural feature, like a lake, waterfall, beach, or meadow. Plan your visit around a map, a wildlife checklist, or other outdoor fun.
- **Connect with nature in your national parks.** From Acadia to Zion, America's National Parks are a treasure trove of outdoor and historical activities for families. Many parks have Junior Ranger programs where children can earn

badges or certificates. Go online to find a park program near your home or vacation destination: www.nps.gov/learn/juniorranger.htm

Five Easy Ways to Pack a Perfect Outdoor Picnic

Keeping food safe and sanitary is the first step to a perfect picnic. Keep cold foods cold with an insulated cooler or bag – and plenty of frozen gel packs. Frozen water bottles or juice boxes can also keep foods cold. As they melt, they then become refreshing beverages.

- **Pack chewy, hearty whole grains.** If you pack sandwiches, getting whole grain goodness is easy with whole wheat rolls or multi-grain bread. Whole grain crackers (for cheese or peanut butter) are another tasty choice. For something different, try a simple cold grain salad made with brown rice, couscous, pasta, or quinoa with chopped veggies and olive oil.
- **Pack crisp, crunchy vegetables.** Pack a variety of colorful veggies onto a tray with a couple of low-fat dips, like Ranch or bleu cheese. Go raw (grape tomatoes, baby carrots, cucumber slices, peppers pieces, celery sticks, and sugar snap peas) or lightly steamed and quickly cooled (broccoli and cauliflower florets, green beans, and asparagus spears).
- **Pack sweet, juicy fruit.** The sweet smells and flavors of summer fruits are practically a picnic necessity. Surround a container of vanilla yogurt with fruit slices for dipping (cantaloupe, kiwi, apple, and pears) – or combine their juicy goodness into a fresh fruit salad with strawberries, blueberries, peaches, nectarines, bananas, and pineapple.
- **Pack creamy, delicious dairy products.** Yogurt and cheese are two easy-to-transport ways to enjoy dairy foods. Yogurt makes a yummy fruit dip (above) or a nutrient-rich, sweet dessert in flavors from key lime to chocolate mousse. An ounce or two of cheese adds layers of flavor to any sandwich. Cheese slices can also be served with crackers and fruit slices.
- **Pack satisfying, flavorful protein foods.** There are dozens of delicious ways to pump protein into picnics, like slices of lean ham, roast beef, turkey, or pastrami with lettuce and tomato on whole grain breads. Tuna and chicken salad mixtures also make satisfying sandwiches. Nuts and seeds can also add protein when sprinkled onto fruit or leafy green salads.

(Brought to you by Eat Right Montana, a coalition promoting healthy eating and active lifestyles. Visit us online at www.eatrightmontana.org/)